

First wolverine crosses wildlife overpass

Elusive animals haven't been seen using the routes in 15 years

BY CATHY ELLIS, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 6, 2012

A wolverine has finally used a wildlife overpass to get across the deadly TransCanada Highway in Banff National Park - the first-ever recorded crossing in 15 years for this species.

A remote camera snapped the image of the highly elusive creature travelling across the Wolverine overpass, just west of the Sunshine turnoff, late last year.

It's the first time a wolverine has ever been recorded using one of the multi-million-dollar overpass structures in Banff, which were built to stop roadkill, help animals access critical habitat and keep populations connected.

"We've had wolverines using the underpasses before, but never an overpass, and any time a wolverine crosses the highway is big news," said Trevor Kinley, a Parks Canada wildlife biologist.

"Every time we have one more structure they're using, it increases the chance we will see them crossing the highway enough that the populations on both sides will interbreed. We don't want them isolated and inbred."

Wolverines are rare, occur at low density, and move widely within very large home ranges. Because of this, it's extremely challenging to gather information on their biology, distribution and abundance.

They are also highly sensitive to human disturbance, including transportation corridors like the TransCanada Highway, where noisy traffic buzzes by.

This first-ever overpass crossing by a wolverine occurred Nov. 16 at 1:09 a.m. In the last 15 years since monitoring began, it is just one of more than 200,000 crossings on both overpasses and underpasses by wildlife, including grizzly and black bears, wolves and ungulates.

There have been nine previous crossings by wolverines at Banff underpasses - three crossings on the same day in 2005, one in 2008, three in 2010 and two in 2011.

Some of the underpass use has been in the new section of the highway-twinning project between Castle Mountain and Lake Louise, an area considered to be prime wolverine range.

Tony Clevenger, a Canmore-based wildlife biologist who has monitored these structures for the past 15 years, said more than half of the wolverine crossings have occurred in the last two years.

He said that may suggest that use of the structures by wolverines is a learned behaviour.

"We don't know a lot about wolverines, but we do know there's a learning curve, which we've seen for grizzly bears and black bears as well," said Clevenger, who is with the Western Transportation Institute's road ecology program at Montana State University.

"Perhaps this is what we're seeing, that it's an initiation of a learning curve, that they're starting to figure out what these things are and starting to use them."

Highways pose significant challenges to wildlife by interrupting natural movement patterns, keeping animals from important habitat, causing genetic isolation.

Vehicles can also run them down.

Clevenger said 10 years ago he would have predicted wolverines would prefer to use overpasses to cross the busy highway, particularly given they are extremely sensitive to human disturbance.

"They seem to use just about anything. Maybe it's got something to do with their attitude; that nobody messes with them. It doesn't seem to matter whether it's a pipe or a big overpass. They just go through," he said.

"Any time a wolverine crosses a highway is cause for celebration. Highways are fragmenters of habitat and any time you can get across is good for the species."

Kinley said Parks Canada hopes the overpass crossing is the first of many more to come by the elusive wolverines.

"It was pretty momentous to first see him on camera," he said.

Cathy Ellis is a reporter with the Rocky Mountain Outlook

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